

WILLIAMSON ON THE EVIDENCE FOR SKEPTICISM

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In the eighth chapter of *Knowledge and Its Limits*, Timothy Williamson attempts to undermine a case for a certain kind of epistemological skepticism by arguing that the skeptic incorrectly assumes that rational thinkers are always in a position to know what their evidence is.¹ The skeptic's error, according to Williamson, is that he attributes too much self-knowledge to the knower. In this paper, I aim to establish two criticisms against Williamson's view: (i) Williamson's solution to the problem of skepticism has other skeptical consequences; and (ii) Williamson's criticism of skepticism is unsuccessful because he presumptuously saddles the skeptic with an excessively strong position on evidence. I will begin by presenting Williamson's case against skepticism and then proceed to explicate my criticisms.

I.

The brand of skepticism that Williamson challenges is "external world skepticism." On this skeptical hypothesis, one's evidence provides an equally strong basis for the conclusion that one is in a "good case" as it is for concluding one is in a "bad case." A good case (GC) is defined as a circumstance where things appear as they generally do, and things are that way; one believes some proposition p and p is true; by ordinary standards, one knows p . A bad case (BC) is defined as a circumstance where things still appear as they generally do, but things are different than they appear; one still believes p but p is false; by all standards one fails to know p since only true propositions can be known. Notice that BC is so bad that if one were to believe that one were in BC, even that belief would not count as knowledge since by definition a person in BC would have no justification for this belief. Consequently, in BC all of one's judgments about the external world fail to count as knowledge.

The skeptic's strategy is straightforward. If one's evidence is the same regardless whether one is in GC or BC, then one has no rational basis for concluding that one is in GC rather than BC. On this point Williamson concedes "it is difficult not to feel sympathy for the sceptic" (174). Thus, for Williamson, the skeptical argument is not averted by correcting a flaw in reasoning, but rather, it is undermined by showing that the skeptical argument rests on a faulty premise. After all, the skeptic cannot stipulate that one's evidence is the same in both GC and BC. To assume *that* would be tantamount to assuming the skeptical conclusion that is under question. Therefore, the skeptic must put forward some argument for the claim that one's evidence is the same in GC and BC.

The argument for sameness of evidence that Williamson attributes to the skeptic is a *reductio* which follows from this valid argument (169-170):

1. Assume (for *reductio*) that the evidence in GC and BC is different.
2. If one is in BC, then one can deduce that one is not in GC (since one's evidence would be different (from (1))).
3. But (2) is false (everyone, including anti-skeptics, believe this).

4. Therefore, it is not the case that one's evidence is different in GC and BC.

Williamson denies the veracity of the second premise on the grounds that the "argument assumes that in the bad case one knows what one's evidence is" (170). In order to justify the kind of deduction that skeptics need for the second premise of this *reductio* to proceed, Williamson attributes this implicit assumption to the skeptic (170-71):

- (P) For any appropriate property π , in any case where one's evidence has π , one knows that one's evidence has π .

Williamson explains that he uses "evidence" in (P) to mean "total evidence," rather than a single item of evidence. What he means by the "appropriate properties" of one's evidence, however, is not perspicuous. Williamson suggests that he understands appropriate properties to consist of "the content of one's evidence" and that "being known to have such a property need not itself be intrinsic to the content of the evidence" (171). Williamson cannot import the external properties of mental content (see 49-64) without trivially falsifying (P). In other words, if Williamson were to maintain that one of the appropriate properties of one's evidence would include whether it was in fact caused by being in GC or BC, then demonstrating the difference in one's evidence would obviously succeed, but this would hardly impress any skeptic. Apparently, Williamson wants to restrict the appropriate properties of one's evidence to properties that are intrinsic to the content of one's evidence. I shall proceed on this understanding of "appropriate properties of one's evidence," although I shall revisit this characterization when parsing out my criticism of this point later.

To show that (P) is false, Williamson employs the following sorites argument (175-77):

- (2_i) For any appropriate property π , if in α_{i-1} one's evidence lacks π , then in α_i one knows that in α_{i-1} one's evidence lacks π .
- (3_i) It is consistent with what one knows in α_i that one is in α_{i-1} .
- (4_i) In α_i one's evidence has π .
- (5_i) In α_{i-1} one's evidence lacks π . (assumption for reductio)
- (6_i) In α_i one knows that in α_{i-1} one's evidence lacks π . (from 2_i & 5_i)
- (7_i) In α_i one knows that one's evidence has π . (from (P) & 4_i)
- (8_i) It is inconsistent with what one knows in α_i that one is in α_{i-1} . (from 6_i & 7_i)
- (9_i) In α_{i-1} , one's evidence has π . (3_i & 8_i contradiction; deny assumption 5_i)
- (10_i) If in α_i one's evidence has π , then in α_{i-1} , one's evidence has π . (conditionalizing 9_i on 4_i)
- (11_i) If in α_i one's evidence has not- π , then in α_{i-1} , one's evidence has not- π .

(12_i) One's evidence in α_{i-1} has the same appropriate properties as one's evidence in α_i .

From (12₀), ..., (12_n), we get:

(13) One's evidence in α_0 has the same appropriate properties as one's evidence in α_n .

This whole argument rests on the assumption (P). Since (13) is obviously false (and is derived from the assumption (P)), then (P) is false. To get a better idea of what I take Williamson's argument to be, consider this following instantiation of it. Suppose one is inspecting one's evidence of the color of some red image. Across a long span of time, the red image is slowly changing to yellow, but the change is so gradual that one cannot detect any change in the image's color from one millisecond to the next. At some middle point (α_i) the image will be red, even though at the next millisecond (α_{i+1}), it will cease to be red. Given that the change is so subtle as to be undetectable to the human eye, the person inspecting his evidence (as to what is the image's color) will not be in a position to know that his evidence does not have the property of being red. This argument is similar to Williamson's argument against luminosity (97-98).

Assuming that the sorites argument is successful, the moral is clear: one is not always in a position to know all of the appropriate properties of one's own evidence. Williamson explains that when in BC one's evidence appears exactly similar to when one is in GC not because the evidence is exactly similar in both cases, but rather due to BC being so bad that one lacks evidence of its badness (177, 180). When in GC, however, one is sometimes, perhaps even often, in a position to know what one's evidence is. Consequently, when in GC one has considerably more evidence which also explains why one's evidence is not the same in both cases. According to Williamson, the skeptical argument fails because the skeptic incorrectly assumes that in BC one is in a position to know what one's evidence is.

II.

Having completed my explanation of what I take to be the essence of Williamson's response to external world skepticism, I will now offer two criticisms. The first problem with Williamson's response to skepticism is that even if he is correct, then a different rationale for skepticism can be extrapolated from his proposed reasoning to dismiss the skeptic's argument for sameness of evidence. Briefly put, since Williamson argues that sameness of evidence cannot be established because one is not always in a position to know one's evidence, it follows that without access to one's evidence one cannot possess knowledge.

Williamson, of course, does not think this is a consequence of his claim that one is not always in a position to know what one's evidence is. Williamson attempts to block the criticism I am pressing by maintaining that rationality is not transparent. Furthermore, Williamson maintains that the non-transparency of rationality is a

consequence of the line of argument he used to dispatch the skeptic's argument for sameness of evidence. Williamson explains it this way:

Rationality is a method. We can follow rules of rationality because we are always in a position to know what they require. If the [sorites argument] is correct, this picture of rationality is mistaken. Just as one cannot always know what one's evidence is, so one cannot always know what rationality requires of one. Just like evidence, the requirements of rationality can differ between indiscriminable situations. Rationality may be a matter of doing the best one can with what one has, but one cannot always know what one has, or whether one has done the best one can with it. (179)

Williamson has put forward a position that seems to rob epistemic agents of the resources that they need to obtain knowledge of the external world. Not only is one's evidence not transparent, but Williamson also maintains that rationality is not transparent. It seems that a skeptic can regroup and launch a new argument for external world skepticism from Williamson's attempt to neutralize the argument for sameness of evidence. Formally, the argument could proceed like this:

- (1) One is not always in a position to know what one's evidence is. (from Williamson's denial of (P))
- (2) If one is not always in a position to know what one's evidence is, then one is not always in a position to know what rationality requires of one. (from Williamson)
- (3) One is not always in a position to know what rationality requires of one. (from (1) and (2))
- (4) One is not always in a position to know what one's evidence is, and one is not always in a position to know what rationality requires of one. (from (1) and (3))
- (5) It is possible that one is not in a position to know what one's evidence is and that one is not in a position to know what rationality requires of one. (from (4))
- (6) It is possible for (5) to obtain in GC.
- (7) If (6), then one is not in a position to know that one is in GC rather than BC.
- (8) If (7), then one has no rational basis to believe that one is in GC rather than BC.

Since (8) is sufficient to grant sameness of evidence, this argument shows that Williamson's reasons for rejecting external world skepticism provide grounds for a new rationale for external world skepticism. Williamson explicitly endorses the first two premises, and the next four premises logically follow from the first two, so Williamson should accept (1)-(5). Premise (8) is straightforward, and it seems that Williamson would accept its truth. That leaves premises (6) and (7) which I believe would be the focal point of contention for Williamson.

What reasons could I cite for Williamson to accept (6) and (7)? For starters, the sorites argument employed by Williamson can hold even when one is in GC. This would mean that Williamson cannot maintain that simply by virtue of being in GC one is in a position to know what one's evidence is and what the requirements of rationality are for one. As I intend it, (7) is supposed to show that there is a *sameness of epistemic position* for GC and BC. Once Williamson has stripped epistemic agents of their awareness of evidence and rational requirements, they are in no position to tell whether they are in GC or BC. It might be the case that one's evidence is not the same in GC as it is in BC, but one is not in a position to know *that* (even if one is in GC). Consequently, external world skepticism remains unimpeded by Williamson's attempt to block it.

Williamson might deny (7) on the grounds that one can be in a position to know one is in GC rather than BC without knowing what one's evidence is and what rationality requires of one. For Williamson, knowing is an unanalyzable factive mental state which cannot be discerned from one's first-person point of view (23-27). The significance of this concept of knowledge and its bearing on skepticism is not lost on Williamson, when he explains:

Indeed, since we are sometimes in no position to know whether we are in a given mental state..., surely one can be in different mental states in situations between which one cannot discriminate.

If knowing is a mental state, then the skeptical argument is not compelling. Indeed, such a view of knowledge need only be defensible for the skeptical argument not to be compelling. (26)

This response to skepticism, however, is useless from a first-person point of view since the epistemic agent's having knowledge that one is in GC rather than BC is conditional on whether the agent is actually in GC or BC. Of course, that condition can only be assessed from a perspective which is not available to the agent's first-person point of view. Laurence Bonjour explains the relevance of this point in his essay, "A Version of Internalist Foundationalism":

Externalists often write misleadingly as though from a perspective in which the reasons that are unavailable to the ordinary believer are apparent to them: from which, for example, it is obvious that our perceptual beliefs about medium-sized physical objects are reliably caused and so mostly true. But in fact, if externalism is the only solution to the regress problem, *there is no such perspective available to anyone*, no perspective from which anyone ever has good reasons to think that anyone's beliefs of any sort are in fact reliably caused. Thus the externalist should speak instead of the mere *possibility* that beliefs are, in ways that are inaccessible to anyone, reliably caused; and hence of the *possibility*, which may or may not be realized, that they are, in the externalist sense, justified. But putting this in this way would, I submit, utterly destroy the appeal of externalism as a response to skepticism.²

Williamson's externalism provides no resources for one to reject skepticism from one's first-person perspective. At best, it offers a conditional solution to skepticism, where the relevant condition cannot be confirmed from the agent's perspective (or any other agent's perspective for that matter). So, it seems hard to call Williamson's response to skepticism successful; certainly no skeptic would find his response convincing. In fact, his account seems to reinforce the skeptic's point—since one might be in the same epistemic position in GC as one might be in BC, one might think there is no non-question-begging reason to infer that one is in GC rather than BC. At least given the resources available to the epistemic agent on Williamson's view, no such reasons seem to be available.

III.

An additional reason—and in my view a much more convincing reason—for thinking that Williamson's response to skepticism fails is that the concept of evidence that he requires the skeptic to use in order to establish sameness of evidence is unnecessarily strong. Recall that Williamson commits the skeptic to use (P) in order to establish that one has the same evidence in GC as in BC. A natural response to this point is to question whether the skeptic is committed to something as strong as (P) to prove sameness of evidence. If some other account can be used by the skeptic to establish sameness of evidence, then Williamson's response will not engage the most plausible accounts of external world skepticism.

Richard Fumerton discusses several problems with Williamson's (P).³ One worry Fumerton raises for (P) is that it might generate an infinite regress.⁴ For example, if one of the appropriate properties of one's evidence is knowing that one's evidence has some property E, then in order to know that one's evidence possesses E one would have to know that one knows one's evidence has E and so on *ad infinitum*. In response, Williamson suggests that by restricting appropriate properties to the intrinsic content of one's evidence the regress is avoided (171). This is important, not simply because this shows how Williamson avoids a vicious regress, but this response also reinforces that Williamson takes the appropriate properties of one's evidence to be limited to the intrinsic content of one's evidence. In other words, any appeal to the extrinsic content of one's evidence (e.g., the evidence's being caused by being in GC) in (P) is going to be disastrous for Williamson's (P) principle.

Given that for (P) Williamson must limit appropriate properties to features that are intrinsic to one's evidence, the skeptic can use a phenomenal concept of evidence that establishes sameness of evidence. The phenomenal concept of evidence limits the properties of one's evidence to the way it appears or seems. One can use testimonial evidence to illustrate how the phenomenal concept of evidence establishes sameness.⁵ Consider a group of alleged eyewitnesses that uniformly testify that some person has committed a murder. (Assume there is no defeating evidence that overturns the testimonial evidence: they have no known motive to convict the man on trial, etc.) In this case, we would seem to have good reason to believe the person is guilty of murder. When the testifiers give their testimony

veridically this is analogous to being in GC; when the testifiers give their testimony falsely this is analogous to being in BC.

Now the skeptic can press Williamson with the following question: what are the different intrinsic features of one's evidence (e.g., the alleged eyewitness testimony) when the testimony is veridical as opposed to when the testimony is false? The obvious answer is that there are no intrinsic differences between the veridical and false testimonies. Of course, there are *some* differences between veridical and false testimonies. For example, in the case of veridical testimony, part of the cause for that evidence will include the purported event occurring in such a way that the testifier witnessed it. But to make this an appropriate property of one's evidence would include an extrinsic feature, which we have already seen entails disastrous consequences when used in (P). I see no other choice than to conclude that when discerning veridical and false testimony the intrinsic features are identical.

After one concedes that the intrinsic features of testimony are not sufficient to determine GC from BC, one is not far from admitting that the phenomenal concept of evidence is sufficient for justifying the skeptic's position on sameness of evidence for all empirical claims. Consider what one's evidence is for any belief concerning the external world and how the intrinsic character would differ from a vivid hallucinatory experience. As I type on my computer right now, I inspect the data given by my empirical senses regarding the appearance of the computer, the room, the scent of my coffee, and other features of my experience. What feature (or features) of my evidence indicates that these experiences constitute a GC or a BC? Presumably, the intrinsic features of my current experiences would be the same (e.g., they would both be like *this*) whether these experiences are part of a GC or a BC. Certainly the extrinsic features of my evidence would be different when these experiences are part of a BC rather than a GC, but we have seen that extrinsic differences are off-limits to Williamson's understanding of appropriate properties in (P). Therefore, the skeptic seems justified in maintaining that there is phenomenal sameness of evidence.

The crux of Williamson's argument against phenomenal sameness presumably is that there is some intrinsic difference between one's evidence in GC and BC, but that the intrinsic difference is not always perceptible. To motivate this claim, Williamson uses his sorites-style argument to demonstrate that one may not be in a position to determine what are the intrinsic features of one's own evidence. Perhaps in the examples cited above (i.e., testimony and typing on my computer) there is some subtle intrinsic feature of my evidence that I simply cannot detect because Williamson is correct about my awareness of my own evidence. Maybe Williamson takes the *factive state* that partially constitutes veridical evidence to be an intrinsic property that shows the intrinsic differences between evidence in GC and BC. Without some rejoinder to this aspect of Williamson's argument against skepticism, his response retains some plausibility.

While I am inclined to think that Williamson's sorites argument is a total failure,⁶ it is not necessary to argue for this strong claim to show that the sorites argument is no help to Williamson's case against skepticism. One can accept Williamson's sorites argument, but maintain that its implications are not typical for relevant instances of our evidence with skepticism. If Williamson's sorites argument works at all, it seems that it would only work in situations where one is required to discern differences in evidential properties that change gradually and infinitesimally across a long period of time. As many of Williamson's critics have pointed out, his sorites argument shows—if it shows anything at all—only that one may fail in a small way to discern the appropriate properties of one's own evidence.⁷ The idea is that Williamson's sorites argument is only applicable to cases where the intrinsic appropriate properties of one's evidence lie on some finely grained continuum. Unfortunately for Williamson, the appropriate properties of one's evidence that would be different in one's evidence for GC and BC do not lie on a gradual continuum. Unlike when an image changes color or when one goes from feeling cold to warm, there are no gradual stages between being in GC and BC. In order for Williamson's sorites argument to assist him in his response to skepticism, the burden is on him to show how gradual, infinitesimal changes in one's evidence are applicable to changes in one's evidence between GC and BC. When it comes to evidence in GC and BC, the changes do not lie on a graded continuum. Thus, the sorites argument will not help him argue against skepticism.

What about the possibility that one of the intrinsic properties of one's evidence is its being constituted by some factive state? Since Williamson takes *knowing* to be an unanalyzable, factive mental state (see 23-33), he might plausibly appeal to factiveness being an intrinsic property of one's evidence. If this is so, then Williamson is not guilty of importing extrinsic features as properties for his evidence. The problem with this move is that for *knowing* to count as a mental state, Williamson construes mental states *broadly* such that features of the world are constituent parts of the mental state (see 21-22, 47-54). If a similar move is considered to help motivate factiveness as an intrinsic property of one's evidence, then counting this property as "intrinsic" is merely a semantic shift. Clearly, the conditions under which some evidence would possess the property of factiveness would be entirely causal or relational. So, even if one claims that an intrinsic property of one's evidence is whether it is factive, there is no reason to expect this property to be known by inspecting the phenomenal character of one's evidence.

From this discussion of evidence it seems difficult for Williamson to provide a principled reason to disallow skeptics from using a phenomenological concept of evidence. Once the skeptic is allowed to make this move, Williamson is out of ways to block the skeptic's conclusion that phenomenologically one's evidence is intrinsically the same in GC and BC. Williamson's attempt to require the skeptic to use his strong interpretation of (P) proved to rely on either extrinsic properties or properties that can be placed on a gradual continuum. Since the relevant features of one's properties when assessing external world skepticism cannot be

defined extrinsically or placed on a gradual scale, Williamson's response fails to assess skepticism with a concept of evidence that obtains in skeptical scenarios.

IV.

Despite my criticisms, Williamson's case against skepticism is actually quite reasonable provided that one is not intending to present arguments that would refute the skeptic using premises the skeptic would accept. Skepticism is a difficult challenge in epistemology, and many contemporary epistemologists (especially among externalists) find it convenient to ignore skepticism rather than face it head-on.⁸ Williamson bravely attempts to show how his brand of externalism can respond to one form of skepticism. Even though Williamson's response to skepticism is unsuccessful, there is still much to be learned by studying his approach. One way I have argued that Williamson's response fails is by defending some form of the skeptic's claim for sameness of evidence in GC as in BC. Some might suspect that granting my defense is a short step to becoming a skeptic—a step that many people would consider unfortunate.

This would only be unfortunate if one thought the only way to rebut skepticism was to show that one's evidence is not phenomenally the same in GC as it is in BC. Broadly construed, I see two approaches to disprove skepticism. The approach taken by Williamson challenges the initial premise that one's evidence seems the same in GC and BC, but this approach does not dispute the reasoning that proceeds from this initial premise. The other approach grants the initial premise and challenges the reasoning that proceeds from it. The moral to be drawn by the failure of Williamson's valiant attempt to undermine the skeptic's claim to sameness of evidence is that if one is going to answer skepticism, the more promising route is to question the skeptic's reasoning.

NOTES

1. Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000). All references to this book will hereafter cite page numbers parenthetically.

2. Laurence Bonjour, "A Version of Internalist Foundationalism," *Epistemic Justification* Ernest Sosa and Laurence Bonjour, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 40.

3. Richard Fumerton, "Williamson On Skepticism and Evidence," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 60.3 (2000): 629-35.

4. Fumerton 631.

5. See Fumerton 631-32.

6. My criticisms are similar to the reasoning in Earl Conee, "The Comforts of Home," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 70.2 (2005): 444-51, and Timothy McGrew and Lydia McGrew, *Internalism and Epistemology: The Architecture of Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2006), chapter 5.

7. Fumerton, "Williamson on Skepticism and Evidence," 634; Conee, "The Comforts of Home," 449-50; John Hawthorne, "Knowledge and Evidence," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 70.2 (2005): 452-55; McGrew and McGrew, *Internalism and Epistemology*, chapter 5.

8. At one point (27) Williamson indicates that ignoring skepticism is the best way to avoid finding oneself in need of refuting it.

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